

Wilbur Cohen's Frontiers

The time was 1961, the place was John Kennedy's Washington and two young New Frontiersmen were leaving Wilbur Cohen's office in the then-Department of Health, Education and Welfare. "I sure hope," one said, "that someday the wheel comes around again for us — and that when it does, we'll have the same energy and commitment."

Wilbur Cohen, who died Monday at the age of 73, was an old New Frontiersman in 1961. He first came to Washington at age 21 during the New Deal, and helped create Social Security. Yet even at age 48, he bubbled with such intelligence and imagination that he served his next-generation colleagues as a model of vigor.

He did not invent Social Security, but did become its first staff member. Year after year he remained one of its smartest, staunchest advocates. Senator Paul Douglas once remarked that "A Social Security expert is a man with Wilbur Cohen's telephone number." Nor did he invent Medicare, Federal health insurance for the elderly or Medicaid for the poor. But it was he, as Assistant Secretary,

Deputy Secretary and finally Secretary of H.E.W., who led the effort to push them through Congress in the Johnson years.

That required tenacity, a quality that remained supremely evident even after he left government. "I don't see for the life of me why anyone over 65 has to live in poverty," he said in 1968. Only last Saturday, The Times's Op-Ed page published an article of which he was co-author, expressing outrage over perverse health care policy.

His tenacious support for Social Security did not win universal admiration, especially in recent years as poverty declined among the old while rising sharply among children. That may reflect an inexorable contradiction. The tenacity needed to pass social welfare laws may also blind one to emerging changes in society — like the generational battle brewing over Social Security funding.

Even so, Wilbur Cohen leaves his own best memorial: the fruits of a half-century of energetic effort, on frontiers new and old, to help people in need and in pain.

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